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Offering Choice But Delivering Tyranny: the Corporate Capture of Agriculture

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Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

Many lobbyists talk a lot about critics of genetic engineering technology denying choice to farmers. They say that farmers should have access to a range of tools and technologies to maximise choice and options. At the same time, somewhat ironically, they decry organic agriculture and [proven agroecological approaches](#), presumably because these practices have no need for the proprietary inputs of the global agrochemical/agritech corporations they are in bed with. And presumably

because [agroecology represents liberation](#) from the tyranny of these profiteering, environment-damaging global conglomerates.

It is fine to talk about ‘choice’ but we do not want to end up offering a false choice (rolling out technologies that have little value and only serve to benefit those who control the technology), to unleash an innovation that has an adverse impact on others or to manipulate a situation whereby only one option is available because other options have been deliberately removed. And we

would certainly not wish to roll out a technology that traps farmers on a treadmill that they find difficult to get off.

Surely, a responsible approach for rolling out important (potentially transformative) technologies would have to consider associated risks, including social, economic and health impacts.

Take the impact of the Green Revolution in India, for instance. Sold on the promise that hybrid seeds and associated chemical inputs would enhance food security on the basis of higher productivity, agriculture was transformed, especially in Punjab. But to gain access to seeds and chemicals many farmers had to take out loans and debt became (and remains) a constant worry. Many became impoverished and social relations within rural communities were radically altered: previously, farmers would save and exchange seeds but now they became dependent on unscrupulous money lenders, banks and seed manufacturers and suppliers. Vandana Shiva in [‘The Violence of the Green Revolution’](#) (1989) describes the social marginalisation and violence that accompanied the process.

On a macro level, the Green Revolution conveniently became tied to an international (neo-colonial) system of trade based on chemical-dependent agro-export mono-cropping linked to loans, sovereign debt repayment and World Bank/IMF structural adjustment (privatisation/deregulation) directives. Many countries in the Global South were deliberately turned into food deficit regions, dependent on (US) agricultural imports and strings-attached aid.

The process led to the massive displacement of the peasantry and, according to the academics [Eric Holt-Giménez et al.](#), (Food rebellions: Crisis and the hunger for Justice, 2009), the consolidation of the global agri-food oligopolies and a shift in the global flow of food:

developing countries produced a billion-dollar yearly surplus in the 1970s; they were importing \$11 billion a year by 2004.

And it’s not as though the Green Revolution delivered on its promises. In India, it merely led to more wheat in the diet, while food productivity per capita showed no increased or even actually decreased (see [‘New Histories of the Green Revolution’](#) by Glenn Stone). And, as described by Bhaskar Save in his [open letter](#) (2006) to officials, it had dire consequences for diets, the environment, farming, health and rural communities.

The ethics of the Green Revolution – at least it was rolled out with little consideration for these impacts – leave much to be desired.

As the push to drive GM crops into India’s fields continues (the second coming of the green revolution – the gene revolution), we should therefore take heed. To date, the track record of GMOs is unimpressive, but the adverse effects on many smallholder farmers are already apparent (see [‘Hybrid Bt cotton: a stranglehold on subsistence farmers in India’](#) by A P Gutierrez).

Aside from looking at the consequences of technology roll outs, we should, when discussing choice, also account for the procedures and decisions that were made which resulted in technologies coming to market in the first place.

Steven Druker, in his book [‘Altered Genes, Twisted Truth’](#), argues that the decision to commercialise GM seeds and food in the US amounted to a subversion of processes put in place to serve the public interest. The result has been a technology roll out which could result (is resulting) in fundamental changes to the genetic core of the world’s food. This decision ultimately benefited [Monsanto’s bottom line](#) and helped the US gain further leverage over global agriculture.

We must therefore put glib talk of the denial of technology by critics to one side if we are to engage in a proper discussion of choice. Any such discussion would account for the nature of the global food system and the dynamics and policies that shape it. This would include looking at how global corporations have captured the policy agenda for agriculture, including key national and international policy-making bodies, and the role of the WTO and World Bank.

Choice is also about the options that could be made available, but which have been closed off or are not even considered. In [Ethiopia](#), for example, agroecology has been scaled up across the entire Tigray region, partly due to enlightened political leaders and the commitment of key institutions.

However, in places where global agribusiness/agritech corporations have leveraged themselves into strategic positions, their interests prevail. From the false narrative that industrial agriculture is necessary to feed the world to providing lavish research grants and the capture of important policy-making institutions, these firms have secured a thick legitimacy within policymakers' mindsets and mainstream discourse. As a result, agroecological approaches are marginalised and receive scant attention and support.

Monsanto had a leading role in drafting the WTO Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights to create seed monopolies. The global food processing industry wrote the WTO Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures. Whether it involves [Codex](#) or the US-India [Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture](#) aimed at restructuring (destroying) Indian agriculture, the powerful agribusiness/food lobby has secured privileged access to policy makers and sets the policy agenda.

From the World Bank's '[enabling the business of agriculture](#)' to the [Gates Foundation's role](#) in opening up African agriculture to global food and agribusiness oligopolies, democratic procedures at sovereign state levels are being bypassed to impose seed monopolies and proprietary inputs on farmers and to incorporate them into a global supply chain dominated by powerful corporations.

We have the [destruction of](#) indigenous farming in Africa as well as the ongoing dismantling of Indian agriculture and the deliberate impoverishment of Indian farmers at the behest of transnational agribusiness. Where is the democratic 'choice'? It has been usurped by corporate-driven World Bank bondage (India is its biggest debtor in the bank's history) and by a trade deal with the US that sacrificed Indian farmers for the sake of developing its nuclear sector.

Similarly, 'aid' packages for Ukraine – on the back of a US-supported coup – are contingent on Western corporations taking over strategic aspects of the economy. And agribusiness interests are at the forefront. Something which neoliberal apologists are silent on as they propagandise about choice, and democracy.

Ukraine's agriculture sector is being [opened up](#) to Monsanto/Bayer. Iraq's seed laws [were changed](#) to facilitate the entry of Monsanto. India's edible oils sector [was undermined](#) to facilitate the entry of Cargill. And [Bayer's hand](#) is possibly behind the ongoing strategy to commercialise GM mustard in India. Whether on the back of militarism, secretive trade deals or strings-attached loans, global food and agribusiness conglomerates secure their interests and have scant regard for choice or democracy.

The ongoing aim is to displace localised, indigenous methods of food production and allow transnational companies to take over, [tying farmers and regions](#) to a system of globalised

production and supply chains dominated by large agribusiness and retail interests. Global corporations with the backing of their host states, are taking over food and agriculture nation by nation.

Many government officials, the media and opinion leaders take this process as a given. They also accept that ([corrupt](#)) profit-driven transnational corporations have a legitimate claim to be owners and custodians of natural assets (the ‘commons’). There is the premise that water, seeds, food, soil and agriculture should be handed over to these conglomerates to milk for profit, under the pretence these entities are somehow serving the needs of humanity.

Ripping land from peasants and displacing highly diverse and productive smallholder agriculture, rolling out very profitable but damaging technologies, externalising the huge social, environmental and health costs of the prevailing neoliberal food system and entire nations being subjected to the policies outlined above: how is any of it serving the needs of humanity?

It is not. Food is becoming denutritified, unhealthy and poisoned with chemicals and diets are becoming less diverse. There is a loss of plant and insect diversity, which threatens food security, soils are being degraded, water tables polluted and depleted and millions of smallholder farmers, so vital to global food production, are being pushed into debt in places like India and squeezed off their land and out of farming.

It is time to place natural assets under local ownership and to develop them in the public interest according to agroecological principles. This involves looking beyond the industrial yield-output paradigm and adopting a systems approach to food and agriculture that accounts for local food security and sovereignty, cropping patterns to ensure diverse nutrition production per acre, water table stability and good soil structure. It also involves pushing back against the large corporations that hold sway over the global food system and more generally challenging the leverage that private capital has over all our lives.

That’s how you ensure liberation from tyranny and support genuine choice.

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